

# OPINION

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## THE 1979 DROUGHT

*(Continued)*

K. F. RUSTAMJI

SLOWLY the train steamed into Lucknow station. The driver was scared to death because hundreds of people were crammed on the roof—men, women and children. They held on to each other for dear life. Some fell and were forgotten. The rest scrambled down when the train stopped, and disappeared in the city. Migrations of 15,000 persons per day. Would they ever return to their villages, I wondered—their lands, the peepal tree near the temple? All that they possessed had been sold to the moneylender. The young men were the first to leave. The old were left behind to survive, if they could. Would the family ever be reunited? The music of Fiddler on the Roof came hauntingly to me. I remembered the scene, on the stage, of the village migrating. There was such a lot unsaid—but the music seemed to say it all—the sadness of partings as the carts rolled out of the village: the happiness of yesterdays gone, the fear of unknown tomorrows uppermost in everyone's mind.

The young Collector in the drought district fretted and fumed. "They call us for one conference after another, and the little time that they can spare for drought is taken up by homilies based on hopelessly wrong statistics. 'All is well,' they say. 'It is only the local press and the opposition that is hostile. We have plenty of food, our irrigation rate goes up by thousands of hectares every year. We must 'marshall our resources', 'develop consumption planning'. Bullshit, I say each time. 'Employment strategy! My bloody foot! All the village industries are languishing. The cartwheel carpenter, the 'lohar', the tailor, the cobbler—they are all finished. Nobody has money to buy anything, except food and fodder. With all this, they want me to save everything. But here there is not enough power, diesel, coal, trucks, dal, cooking oil, very little petrol; the IOC is on 'go slow', the FCI is on 'go slow', the railways are wanting to strike; lots of others are waiting for strikes to get bonus. What the hell has gone wrong with us as a people? Why can't we put everything we have to fight this calamity, and shoot anyone who dares obstruct it?"

"When we are facing such a problem, why not close down all the training in Mussorie, Hyderabad, Baroda or everywhere, and send the boys and girls out to help us in the field?"

This has always been our way, I mused. They say, "Don't be an

alarmist. Wait. It will pass. We have had such droughts in the past. It works out all right in the end, and our economy just bounces back after one good monsoon." God, I said to myself, they don't know what this drought has done. And they don't even seem to know that since the last drought the population has gone up by 25 per cent, oil hikes have driven our price graphs straight through the ceiling. All this has been inflicted on a people already at the end of their tether.

The Collector continued, "We don't have drinking water in 358 villages. Tomorrow it may be 1,000. Cattle look like living skeletons. What do I do? We don't have enough rigs—or tankers. Why should the army not help us to move the water in tankers?"

"Training will be disrupted," I replied, in the mournful voice of a Defence Ministry debate. "Shit," I added mentally, as I am an older person. The parting words of the Collector were, "We haven't yet heard the screams of famished people dying."

"My God !" he said, "they have got me by the neck. The alternatives are plain and brutal. Allow the relief work to go to hell and face the anger of the people—or let the elections go to hell and face the anger of government—"

A friend of mine, a retired brigadier, is in charge of education and tours about in Rajasthan to inspect schools. He said, "I cannot eat my food when I go to visit our schools. Children look at me with hunger in their eyes. I just portion out my food among them, lest they should fight over it, and then I move away to hide the tears in my eyes."

The Commissioner in Jammu and Kashmir had all the statistics on his finger tips. "We have lost the maize in the mountains due to drought. the Valley had a good paddy crop. Three days before harvesting, we had one hailstorm after another—three of them—and they flattened the crop completely. One poor villager of Kupwara saw the damage to his crop, and ran back to his family: "What will we eat?" he said: then collapsed and died.

The police officer was a new type—M. Tech.—scientific to the point of bitter cynicism.

"What is the use of talking about drought, when our entire organisation of agriculture is unscientific and wasteful? Today you can succeed in agriculture only if you try for bigness, but we have allowed fragmentation till there are fields you can jump across. This is the basic cause of the disunity that prevails in the villages. We need a Kairon in this State."

"But what is the answer now?"

"Break it all up. Try co-operative farming. If you can't, the whole system will be destroyed by droughts, floods and village fights."

"What is the crime position?" I asked, hoping to get him away from a deep penchant for shattering everything to bits.

"Rising rapidly. What can we expect when hundreds of people need grain, and some politician collects the village and says loot that man, and they loot him. Our problem is what to do? Arrest these hungry people, or look the other way and let it become uncontrollable? Did

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you think, Sir, crime would not rise?"

"I only wanted to know what is the worst that can happen," I said lamely.

"In the Panchayat elections more than 50 persons were killed. Now we have another election and the fever is rising—and we have drought, starvation and prices—a good explosive mixture. With it we have to guard the canals and reservoirs, even the tube wells, the godowns, and hundreds of people need protection of some type or the other. Today a kerosene dealer refused to lift his stock unless he got a guard for his protection at the time of distribution. I haven't got one single man in reserve. If anything goes wrong, it will take some time to get reinforcements. But don't you know this in Delhi?"

"Delli Door Ast," I said.

He laughed: "You want us to go to hell in our own sweet way.

If we had gone through every year since 1900, we could not have found worse dates for the election than the first week of January 1980."

The Doctor was chewing *pan* in a tight-lipped manner. Whenever he spoke he opened the mouth just wide enough to keep the juices intact.

"Will malnutrition give us epidemics like malaria and flu?" I asked.

"Yes."

"And what else?"

"Hepatitis."

"And cholera?"

"Varanasi. First give us food and good water."

I gave up. He seemed to be a sample of centre-state relationship.

Say as little as possible, and ask for as much as possible. Are we paying the price for the gradual deforestation of the mountains? Why has the rainfall gone down successively over the years?

A situation of this type provides a perfect opportunity for the nit-picker and the hyper-critical intellectual groups or the ignorant investigator. There is the person who will tell you that out of every ten rupees spent on relief, five go into the pockets of the bureaucrats and two or three into the pockets of the politicians, and only two reach the actual ground for relief work. Such an exaggeration creates a serious problem in drought relief because there is a tendency to play safe, cut resources, exercise undue control and prescribe procedures which delay and create differences.

In such a calamity it is possible that whatever Government can do, or the district authorities can do, is really very minimal in its content. When whole villages are in need, it is possible that relief may reach only a small proportion of them. And yet, even that small proportion is worth saving. Nobody must be considered expendable. Nobody can be denied anything that can be given by every single individual of this country to save him from want.

Unless we have a long range plan, we cannot adequately tackle famine in one season by *ad hoc* relief works and state charity. The ancient Hindu custom of building tanks, generation after generation, as philanthropic gestures on the part of successive rulers and rich, had much

cumulative sense in it. The Chinese method, of utilising entire land armies like hordes of ants to terrace, dam and reconstruct, has yielded good results. We too made plans which get energised only when the trouble comes; but is our effort based on massive man power utilisation, in one continuous and scientific plan of insurance, against drought?

This is not the time for uniformed criticism, cheese-paring or blame throwing. This is the time when every single individual, must stand behind the people who are in the field. I must mention one encouraging sign that I saw in several districts of the areas that I visited. There is a new spirit in the district authorities which probably has arisen owing to the challenge. There is a desire to improvise — dig a canal here, build a road there, build a small dam at another place, a small block dam perhaps, a diversion of some type, keep on looking at the rural scene on the ground at the micro level and with the help of the BDOs and the local people devise small measures to conserve those few drops of water on which existence depends. I have seen a large number of Collectors with a new light in their eyes. The rages of the past have disappeared. There is a desire to do the utmost and care a damn for what the rules say. Diversions have been made of funds, a tubewell has been dug which has not been sanctioned at all. Papers may have been held up in the Secretariat, but the Collector has gone ahead with the work in order to see that there is no delay. This is the type of work that needs to be encouraged. If we want to talk about dealing with the distress on a war footing we will have to assure those people who are working to combat it that at a later date we will condone all the petty irregularities that were committed, provided they were done in the public interest. I also noticed cohesion in the district which was lacking in the past. It is these people at the ground level who have been the first to realise the enormity of the danger that is facing this country, and when you are dealing with matters of this type, the very size of the task makes you bigger than you are....

The elections today seem to be the only event of importance. The fact is that whoever becomes the Prime Minister may live to regret the day he or she got elected. The problems of recovery will be so acute — so enormous — so alarming in size — that a Cabinet divided or unsure of itself would be a sure invitation to disaster....

Let us not give the villagers an impression that they have been forgotten by God and man because of politics. Many of them will accept it as their lot. The rest will take up arms, kill and injure and assassinate. Let us not under-estimate the fear and depression that grips the human spirit in the rural areas today.

In the famine of 1896, thirteen Englishmen were killed by irate mobs. One Deputy Commissioner died due to exhaustion and thirst in the inaccessible wilds.

What a lot can be done if we only look at this drought in the right way? This 'sukha' will give us a bigger economic set-back than all the wars that we have fought so far. Why can't we make a total and united effort? Close all the training academies, give tasks to the armed forces,

utilise the para military and police, mobilise the public and private sectors, import rigs or parts of them, slash foodgrain export, take the help of whoever can help—missionaries, Marwari Aid Society, Ramakrishna Mission, anybody that can do something constructive, conserve grain, plan for rationing when it becomes necessary, ban political parties that preach or incite looting, send young scientists and engineers to plan project works and check performance, collect funds, garments, medicines etc., legislate severe penalties for those who try to get illegal personal benefits out of this human tragedy, and ensure that the punishment is carried out in a summary manner.

Under the Prime Minister, a National Drought Authority or Committee must be organised on a non-political basis with full powers to deal with every matter connected with drought relief and making an impact on allied issues of: price control, movements, distribution of power, diesel, coal and, above all, water management. It should have a secretariat consisting of representatives of all concerned ministries at such a high level that a reference to the parent Ministry will not be required except by telephone. The head of the authority should be a serving or retired bureaucrat or general of the army, and he should be given time to study the situation and prepare a plan which would be implemented by him. It would be a big responsibility both in the short as well as long term. It would not only need an exceptional man, with ruthless drive and imagination, but his plan must represent the highest common multiple of public support. He would also have to change the present method of drought control—by conferences and circulars. The centre must make a more positive and effective contribution on the ground to guide, check and ensure performance.

In addition to the steps to alleviate distress, an effort must be made on the psychological plane to express support for rural areas. Shastriji suggested fasting for a day. Let us begin by closing all restaurants and stop all private vehicles once a week. The city dweller's biggest obsession of using the difficulties of government to hold the people to ransom by strikes will have to be faced. And although he too is facing the impact of prices, if a proper description of the suffering of the rural areas is given, the city man would gladly donate a day's wage each month.

To sum up, the more I review the processes of national plenty against national scarcity, the more convinced I am that the core problem before this country is the terrible drought of 79 and its consequences. The sights and sounds of the 'sukha' areas flash through my mind like horrid tableaux. Yet in the atmosphere of Delhi with its preoccupations with other questions—more dramatic, more news-worthy—it seems to me that drought may not receive the attention it deserves till it reaches the uncontrollable stage. It is the foremost and the grimmest problem before us. What could be more basic than hunger and thirst for millions of people? I have been deeply moved, and I feel involved and emotionally committed to assist in whatever way I can. Hence this effort of mine which is in the form of a prayer and an appeal.

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